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MEETING SANFORD MEISNER:
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENT, AND
PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE MEISNER TECHNIQUE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Mandy Leigh Butler
BA Theatre, Georgia College & State University, 2003
MFA Theatre Pedagogy Candidate, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Dr. Noreen C. Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies, Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

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The Sanford Meisner Technique is among the most mysterious and misunderstood approaches to the craft of acting. Very often, it is taught poorly, incompletely, or even dangerously. Through the exploration of Meisner's private life, as well as a detailed analysis of his system, this work aims to dispel some of the common misconceptions which plague the Technique and its most fervent supporters. After being made privy to his biography, readers will be taken through Meisner's foundational exercises, beginning at the first phase of Repetition and ending with the introduction of text. In addition to the descriptions of student responsibilities, the conduct required of a Meisner teacher, both in a studio and in a university setting, will be discussed at length. Finally, to complete this comprehensive view of the Meisner Technique, there will be an analysis of its application to Longform Improvisation.

Introduction

"Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then, gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers."—Rainer Maria Rilke

The first time I was exposed to the Meisner Technique, I was an eighteen-year old college freshman who was about as awkward and misguided as they come. I had decided to major in Theatre Performance, despite of (and perhaps, because of) the protests of my parents and, fresh out of high school, I thought that I had this “acting thing” all figured out. I thought that it was mostly about being liked—liked by directors, agents, audiences, critics, and the ensemble. Of course, I knew that there was technique involved and I was eager to learn, but I viewed anything to which I was introduced as a means of becoming likeable enough to be deserving of opportunities to work.

Imagine my surprise when, early on in my time in undergraduate school, we were required to attend a Meisner workshop led by Linwoodt Jenkins, who then taught the Meisner

Technique at Atlanta's Actor's Express. He was a commanding presence who expected nothing short of authenticity from his students and he was willing to push us in order to get it. Right away, I decided that the Meisner Technique was not for me. It is an understatement to assert that I hated it. In actuality, I loathed it; I ridiculed the seemingly never-ending repetition, which has become the Technique's trademark, and I took every opportunity to commiserate with like-minded peers who were equally put out with having had an afternoon "wasted."

By the time that we were required to attend a second workshop, my brattiness was secondary only to my nearly debilitating need to be liked. The result, of course, was that I strove to please the instructor by appearing to embrace the work when, internally, I was resisting with all of my might. I would soon come to learn that, when it comes to the Meisner Technique, holding back does only one thing for you: It gets you called out. The very nature of the Repetition exercises is such that two partners are observing each other verbally and absolutely nothing is off limits—including declaring that your partner is a big phony.

After what I classified as an abysmal exercise, I wanted nothing more than to run away from the Meisner Technique as quickly as I could, without ever looking back. Given that we still had several hours left to go, abrupt departure was not an option, so I chose to fight rather than to flee. After being deeply embarrassed, I had a score to settle and my competitive nature took hold, impelling me to run *toward* the work, rather than away from it. The rest of the afternoon was something akin to an "authenticity boot camp." I left the studio feeling humbled, challenged, inspired, and exhausted.

Nearly twelve years after our rocky start, my relationship with the Meisner Technique has only intensified and grown more complicated. It is an approach to acting which has provided me

with some of the biggest “A-ha!” moments of my life and I consider myself to be a fervent advocate of its merits. There is no denying, however, that the Technique is an unusual one—unorthodox, even—and, as such, I found that as I delved deeper and deeper into it, I had more questions than answers. Every time I gained understanding of one element, I found confusion elsewhere. For every dot I managed to connect, a dozen more would take its place.

While it would have been easy for me to walk away from the Technique at any time, I chose, instead, to make a conscious decision to go wherever the questions would lead me. As was foreshadowed in my first encounter with Meisner’s teachings, I could never have anticipated where my journey would take me. What started out as an actor/teacher’s earnest attempt to more fully comprehend the Technique quickly became something of a detective story. Along the way, I have managed to answer many of my questions, but have, of course, formed new queries at every turn.

When I began this project, I was unsure how much of my writing would be dominated by theory and how much of my efforts would be devoted to biographical study. I would soon come to learn that, when dealing with Meisner, there is no clear division between the two; you simply cannot tell one story without the other. When I discussed this with Kent Paul, who would become a major contributor to this work, he offered a startling comment that would both break my heart and galvanize me. It was, in fact, this one remark that would serve as the foundation for my research:

That's an interesting question because, you see, Lee Strasberg adored himself, so all his system is about looking inward and celebrating your own personal experiences. Meisner hated himself. He was really a self-loathing person, which is why he extroverted the actor. He wanted to make things up; he wanted fantasy. So, his own kind of self-loathing led to a much healthier imaginative system of training actors, I think. So, there's an interesting connection there. (Paul)

While researching Sanford Meisner, who was a fiercely private man, I have felt frustrated, joyful, overwhelmed, tenacious, grateful, defeated, fascinated, alive, and most of all, curious. More than anything, it is this unwavering curiosity which has kept me energized through all of this. My wish is not for this thesis to present to you the answers to all of my questions, but to give you enough information about my experiences so that you may form your own. I hope that you enjoy your pursuit as much as I am still enjoying mine. To borrow the last phrase of Sydney Pollack's introduction to *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, "I envy all of you who may be discovering Sandy for the first time."

Chapter 1: Meeting Sanford Meisner

In today's America, where nearly everyone seems to be chasing fame and having a personal webpage is all but mandatory, self-marketing has become a necessity. In our celebrity-obsessed culture, it is almost unthinkable that someone who was lauded for decades by some of the biggest names in Hollywood was content to stay out of the limelight. Yet, this is precisely what Sanford Meisner did. The prolific acting teacher has been called “Theatre's best kept secret,” and only since his death in February of 1997 has his name begun to spread outside of the Theatre community that he served for over sixty years (Doob).

It is widely known that Meisner (called Sandy by nearly everyone who knew him) was not a self-promoter (MMC). In fact, in his ninety-one years of life, the enigmatic teacher gave only a handful of documented interviews. In one of these interviews, the frequently terse Meisner presents a comedic answer to those calling for an autobiography: “Look, the only thing I can remember out of my past is that Gregory Peck owes me five dollars. That's all. Once I put that down, that's the book” (Shepherd 41).

The intensely private Meisner further voices his opposition to writing a book by openly criticizing those of his contemporaries who think differently on the matter:

These people writing books--they hesitate at nothing. They write a book on anything,

including themselves...It's kind of horrifying, isn't it? Long ago, I realized that a creative textbook is a contradiction in terms. I tried to do it. I spent four lovely months in Puerto Rico in a little house on the beach. I went there to write 'my book.' I wrote down two exercises. I didn't understand them after I read them and that was the end of 'my book.'

(Shepherd 40)

Of a second failed attempt to write a book, Meisner says, “A collaborator was found, a book was written, and I was bitterly disappointed at the results” (Meisner xviii). From that point forward, Meisner remained resolute in his opposition to ever publishing a written work.

Former student Louise M. Stinespring remembers that, in 1971, her teacher railed against the prospect of writing a text about acting. She recalls, “He expressed his view that it is difficult, at best, to talk about acting and simply impossible to write about acting...He repeatedly assured us that he would never write a book about how to teach acting because it would be of no service to the actor” (21).

Despite all of his grumblings, however, Meisner did eventually lend his name to a book on acting. Co-authored by Dennis Longwell, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, is the chronicle of a sort of composite class of Meisner students throughout the years. What exactly changed Meisner's mind is not clear. When prompted by an interviewer to give an explanation for the change of heart, a rather coy Meisner “claims that a lot persistent people had been urging him to do so and he didn't know how to refuse” (Harvey 34).

Longwell, who was interviewed for this project, maintains that Meisner did not compromise himself by consenting to the publication of the book. He insists that, in spite of his publisher's demands for a generic “how-to” book, Meisner “realized, quite truthfully, that you

cannot learn to act by reading a book.” In fact, the end result of Longwell's collaboration with Meisner was not a “how-to” book, but rather a “description of what he does in the classroom” (RM and DL). Sydney Pollack, aware of the potential for such books to disappoint, asserts in the book’s introduction, “There are almost no good books about acting. This is one of the best” (xvi).

Many of the examples illustrated in the text are taken from transcripts from a 1984 documentary produced by Kent Paul and shot by Sydney Pollack--both former students of Meisner. In discussing his compulsion to film Meisner at work, Kent Paul explains, “I had been obsessed by the fact that there was very little documentation of his history and his work and I sort of re-directed the activities of the Playhouse Repertory Company into getting Meisner documented” (RM and KP).

In truth, the urgency to chronicle his teachings was brought about by a series of devastating medical crises which Meisner only narrowly survived. By the mid-1980s, the chain-smoking Meisner had undergone the grueling process of teaching himself to speak after losing his larynx to two bouts of throat cancer. Meisner grew frustrated with the slow progress produced through his physician-sanctioned aftercare and decided to take matters into his own disciplined hands:

After my operation, I couldn't utter a sound. I was in Bequia where I lived. I used to go to a beach there and practice every day. I was determined to speak. I practiced extensively. I don't know any reason why I should speak the way I used to. I don't say anything different. (Doob)

In fact, Meisner would never again speak as he used to. Instead, the “old lion” trained himself to produce language rather crudely. Through a skillful method involving swallowing air to literally burp out his words, the fiercely determined Meisner was able to resume his position at the Neighborhood Playhouse (Doob).

At roughly the same time that he was learning to vocalize again, Meisner developed severe cataracts which made it impossible for the voracious reader to see print. Undaunted, the resourceful Meisner decided to use this affliction to his advantage, rigging a microphone to the thick-lens glasses he was prescribed. In enabling his students to hear his nearly inaudible belch-language, Meisner made an almost biblical swap--effectively trading his sight for speech.

Incredibly, though, this would not be the last of Meisner's close calls with death. In his late seventies, the already ravaged Meisner suffered a shattered hip after being struck by a delivery truck which dragged him down a New York City street for two full blocks. Rendered with a permanent limp from the accident, the resilient Meisner boasted of his hip surgery: “I've been through eight or nine operations in the last eight or nine years. This is the easiest” (Harvey 34).

With the man who many of his students held as an artistic father figure coming so close to meeting his demise, a consumed Kent Paul began a sort of calling in of the troops (Esper 285). In the end, it would prove to take nothing short of a small army for the project to reach its completion. A very driven Paul's efforts led to almost forty hours of footage, filmed over the summers of 1981 and 1982 in a space given to him by the Public Theatre's Joseph Papp (MMC).

According to Paul, Papp's connection with Meisner stemmed from brief interactions when Papp, who was then a stage manager for CBS television, would pick up his first wife from private classes she attended at the Playhouse. The connection between the two men would be strengthened when Meisner agreed to give Papp his first directing job, which was a student production of *The Green Bird*. Papp, who was "very loyal to people who had helped him," did not hesitate to repay the favor to Meisner by contributing the space free of charge (Paul).

When asked whether or not famed director Sydney Pollack, who served as Meisner's assistant for over eight years, was instrumental in the project, Paul confides:

How to answer that question discreetly?...Sydney had been very close to Sandy...After Sandy had his larynx removed, Sydney was discomforted and was fearful that he would embarrass himself by not being able to handle that, so he was not in touch with Sandy for seven years. And he had terrible guilt about it, so I really played upon that guilt to get him to help us. (RM and KP)

Kent Paul goes on to reveal that Pollack's guilt was so powerful that, in lieu of accepting a car for the profits from his hit film *Tootsie*, he persuaded Columbia Pictures to put up one hundred thousand dollars to fund the making of the "videotaped distillation of Meisner's system."

Additional funding would come from an altogether unlikely source. Former Meisner student and famous children's puppeteer Shari Lewis, utilizing a connection she had at the National Endowment for the Arts, persuaded the organization to award the project the maximum grant available. A grateful Kent Paul does not hesitate to give Lewis full credit. "Without Shari Lewis, the classes would never have been produced," he says (RM and KP).

Paul's mission resulted in the most extensive documentation of Meisner's work in existence. The two summers spent in Papp's downtown Theatre culminated in a 1984 documentary which would eventually be developed into an episode of *American Masters* for PBS in 1990. In personal interviews conducted for this project, both Longwell and Paul make it clear that the writing of the book and the creation of the documentary, while overlapping a bit, were two separate endeavors. In addition to viewing good friend Kent Paul's footage, Longwell sat in on many of Meisner's classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse and worked tirelessly to preserve the master teacher's system in book form (Longwell and Paul, personal int.).

Longwell's efforts proved to be invaluable upon the release of Meisner's long-awaited book, published in 1987. *Meisner on Acting* has come to serve as a seminal text for those seeking to gain an understanding of the master's Technique. Much of the work discussed in the book deals with the structured improvisational exercises which dominate the first year of a two-year curriculum created by Meisner.

The influence of Meisner's time spent studying classical piano at the Damrosch Institute of Music, which would later be absorbed into the Julliard School, is evident in the construction of his introductory exercises (Paul). These improvisations, often likened to a musician's scales, involve two actors repeating their observations of each other rapidly and are designed to free the

actor of the self-consciousness which so often impedes the ability to follow one's impulses. In short, Meisner has created a succession of foundational exercises which are dependent on the principle that "to transfer the point of concentration outside of yourself is a big battle won" (Meisner 26).

In a recorded master class distributed by his estate, Meisner freely admits that his famed Repetition exercises are tedious and can become boring, but he claims that they are necessary, as they are the start of something (MMC). In examining this statement, it seems only fitting to go back to Meisner's start to discover not only how he became, many would argue, the most influential American acting teacher of the twentieth century, but also what led him to develop a system of acting which is based so solidly in the attempt to "take the heat off of yourself" (Meisner 26).

Born in 1905 to Jewish immigrants from Hungary, the Brooklyn-raised Meisner grew up as a loner, living in a "world of fantasy." In documentary footage from *American Masters*, Meisner identifies his inclination toward isolation as a result of his parents holding him responsible for the death of his younger brother when Meisner was five and his brother, Jacob, was three. The family had gone to the Catskills in an attempt to improve Sanford's ailing health. It was on this trip that Jacob was given unpasteurized milk, which led to his subsequent death of bovine tuberculosis (Doob).

In his book, Meisner states that it is this event which has served as "the dominant emotional influence in my life from which I have never, after all these years, escaped" (Meisner 5). It was very shortly after this experience that a young Meisner set his sights on acting. In a

statement that foreshadows the domineering teacher he would later become, Meisner offers this anecdote:

As far as I was concerned, guilt was the only thing that people felt toward me, and I had to protect myself, so I withdrew. I read forty million books and stayed away from everyone. The one gesture I made outward was making up little pageants with my cousins and the kids in the neighborhood. And that did something for me, because if they didn't do what I wanted them to, I would practically kill them. (Harvey 36)

The traumatic circumstances which surround the beginnings of Meisner's artistic ambition would forever inform his values and his methods. From that very early stage in his development, Meisner linked his feelings of guilt and isolation to his perceptions on the craft of acting. It comes as no surprise that he, someone who came to think of anonymity as a comfort, developed a style of acting which is wholly based on revealing something about yourself only after the behavior of another person has tricked you into doing so (Rand and Scorcio 13). In stark opposition to many approaches which put the individual's inner thoughts and feelings above all else, Meisner's approach centers on the precept that one should be “attached to something outside of yourself” (Meisner 24).

The evolution that Meisner's theories have undergone is particularly of interest, given that he, as a young man of twenty-five, found an artistic home in the Group Theatre--an organization with an abiding mission to bring Constantin Stanislavski's teachings to America (Clurman 17). Although Meisner stayed with the Group throughout its decade-long duration, he began to

question its methods just two years after the company was born. In a 1977 interview, Meisner declares boldly, “Our approach was not organic, that is to say not healthy” (Shepherd 38).

Meisner's primary objections to the Group's methods are specifically linked to the hold that Lee Strasberg had on the company (Meisner 9). In contrast to Meisner's interpretation of Stanislavski's approach, Strasberg's Technique centers on “privileging the actor's self over his or her role” (Auslander 30-1, qtd. in Krasner 99).

While Meisner would eventually become “openly contemptuous” of Strasberg's teachings, he would always maintain that his future nemesis provided “a great, uplifting influence” for a young Meisner in search of a mentor (Meisner 7). Of his early dealings with Strasberg, Meisner tells *American Film's* Stephen Harvey, “At the beginning, we went on the premise that nobody knew how to act except Strasberg, and he was going to teach us” (36, 67).

The two men parted ways after Meisner became disenchanted with Strasberg's way of urging actors to draw on past events to reach the level of emotion for which a scene calls. Perhaps it was Meisner's inner guilt over his brother's death which made him so unwilling to delve into his own emotional pain. Instead, he opted to break away from Strasberg altogether so that he could form a system based on “living truthfully under the given imaginary circumstances.” Meisner's emphasis on drawing from imagination rather than from hidden emotional turmoil would come to serve as the fundamental difference between his teachings and those of Strasberg (MMC).

In an interview with the Tulane Drama Review in 1964, Meisner offers this rather thinly veiled opinion of Strasberg's teachings:

It is very necessary for the acting teacher to know his limit. It is not in the province of the acting teacher nor in his capabilities to penetrate into the hidden, untamperable regions of the actor's personality...Are they emulating their analysts? Do they need one?...I have had even more extensive experience with dentists than with psychoanalysts but that doesn't license me to pull a tooth. (221)

Of Meisner's resistance to the work generally identified with Strasberg's "Method," former student José Angel Santana, who appears in both the documentary footage and in the book, says, "He was such a stickler for keeping the work of the actor separate from one's personal life and he almost considered it offensive when an acting teacher would delve into a person's life" (Quillen and Santana).

With such a strong aversion to dealing with inner emotions in his profession, one wonders if Meisner was as hesitant to be vulnerable in his personal life. To begin to answer this question, it is necessary to first look at Meisner's troubled relationships with women.

In 1940, Meisner married his first wife, young Peggy Meyer, whom he had met while she was studying under him at the Playhouse. The same year that the couple divorced, 1947, Meisner would marry Betty Gooch, another of his former students (Kemper 382). According to a Meisner family member, both of these marriages ended "in the most horrible way" (RM and RS).

It is not surprising that Meisner's marriages should end on less than amicable terms. Many of his former pupils accuse Meisner of being particularly "cruel to women." According to former student, Charles Dubin, who would go on to direct the wildly successful *M*A*S*H* television series, it was not uncommon for Meisner to tell female students with a perceived lack

of talent to “get married and pregnant and start having babies” (RM and CD). Another student recalls her former teacher telling women, “You're fat. You're ugly. And you're never going to make it” (RM and KL).

It seems that the male students in Meisner's class had an altogether different experience with the master teacher. Thomas Fatone, who studied at the Playhouse in the early 1950s, opines, “In Sandy's case, I think he had a bias toward the boys. Being one of them, I wasn't intimidated by him...There were two boys in my class who got away with murder. He was delighted by them...I do remember the girls being very upset” (RM and TF).

Not unexpectedly, the differences in Meisner's interactions with the two genders, coupled with the failure of his marriages, prompted people at the Playhouse to begin speculating about his sexual preference. The man at the center of the conjecture remained “close-mouthed” on the subject for years. Rumors swirled of Meisner having an affair with Playhouse director Paul Morrison. The gossip would be confirmed in a most anti-climactic fashion when Meisner, in his thirties by then, entered the office of fellow instructor Harold Baldrige to offer this nonchalant confession, “I'm just not going to worry about it anymore--playing it straight” (RM and HB).

Always true to his word, after the relationship with Morrison ended, Meisner began seeing another of his former students--this time a male by the name of Jimmy Carville. The relationship between the two men would last for over thirty years, ending only with Meisner's passing (Harbin 277). In a personal interview conducted for this project, Meisner's nephew, Danny, recalls the men as a couple:

They weren't affectionate or anything like that, but you know that they both needed each other very much and I think that, without Jimmy in the later part of his life, Sandy wouldn't have been able to function at all. Jimmy really took care of Sandy and Sandy had a lot of problems. They were together for a very long time.

In fact, the couple would come to have a son together in the most unlikely of ways. After the two men moved to Bequia, a small island in the West Indies, in the 1960s, they noticed an adolescent boy “just sort of hanging around” on the beach. The boy, named Boolu, was nearly deaf and had nowhere to go. Carville and Meisner welcomed Boolu into their home and would later adopt him after a tragic accident involving a stove explosion left him with burns on over ninety percent of his body. The couple secured the best medical care for their son and flew him back and forth to the United States until he was well. According to an obituary appearing in the Salt Lake City newspaper *Deseret News*, Meisner would die “in the arms of his adopted son.” Today, Julian “Boolu” Martin, splits his time between Los Angeles and his native home of Bequia (D. Meisner).

With Meisner's tumultuous romantic history accounted for, it is now imperative to take a look at his childhood in order to obtain a more complete understanding of his lifelong need to maintain a privacy so consuming that it would lead him to spend his time off on the secluded island of Bequia. Of the appeal of his second home, Meisner tells an interviewer, “On Bequia, I imagine no one has ever heard of the Theatre. Nobody heard of anything that made up my life” (Doob).

Of course, Meisner could not escape what made up his life and he would forever be tortured by a persistent feeling of being misunderstood. He would often refer to himself as a

“freak,” (D. Meisner) and would exhibit a self-destructive streak that would result in his smoking incessantly, even after he'd lost his larynx and nearly died of throat cancer (RM and TR). As one might expect, Meisner's feelings of being misunderstood can be traced back to his family life.

Aside from his parents and the young Jacob, whose death would become such a source of anguish for Meisner, there was a younger sister, Ruth, with whom he was very close. She died in 1983 after her own bout with cancer. The last addition to the family would be a much younger brother named Robert. In *Meisner on Acting*, Meisner's co-author, Dennis Longwell, writes of Robert, "A second brother, Robert, was born when Meisner was sixteen...and with whom he has lost contact" (6).

In further exploration of Meisner's relationship with his family, it was discovered that Meisner's statement is simply not true. While “never very close” with his brother, the two had never lost touch. In an audio-recorded interview conducted by Robert Meisner while researching for a book he intended to call *Discovering Sandy*, the younger Meisner recounts his brother's cold reaction to being confronted about the discrepancy:

He wrote in his book that he lost contact with me, which he never did. He was an idol for me. At the instigation of my kids, I went to Sandy's apartment on 58th Street and I asked him, 'Why would you write that?' And he looked at me for a long while and he said, 'Excuse me. I have to get ready for school,' and he went in and shaved and he never answered that question, and I'm hoping that this book will help me answer that question. (RM and RS)

Sadly, Robert Meisner, would never live to complete his book. What survives on audiotapes is the heart wrenching journey of a bereaved brother seeking to gain a closeness with his “idol” that he could never obtain in life. The youngest of the Meisner children boasts an impressive roster of star talent who graciously granted him interviews two years after his brother's death. Yet, it is not the comments of people like Joanne Woodward, Robert Duvall, Tony Randall, Horton Foote, or Lee Grant that are the most compelling.

Instead, it is Robert Meisner himself who, in brief conversation between interview questions, divulges the most intimate details of his and his family's relationship with his tortured older brother. It is only through the tracking of Robert Meisner's statements that I was able to begin to gain an understanding of the demons that plagued Sanford Meisner in his personal life.

For instance, in many interviews and with very little prompt, an obviously grief-stricken Robert offers startling insight into the Meisner family home. Of his brother's relationship with their father, Hermann, Robert says, “It was a bad relationship. It was never honest. My father was not an emotional man. He was a Meisner. I'm a Meisner. It's very difficult for us to say, 'I love you'” (RM and TF).

Funnily enough, Hermann would bear a need similar to his son's--the perpetual compulsion to seek out that which is authentic. While Sanford's pursuit led him to devote his life to guiding his students to artistic truth, the Meisner patriarch would take a far less sophisticated approach. A furrier for most of his life, the elder Meisner had an awkward ritual of making a point to shake hands with ladies who were wearing fur. While feigning politeness, Hermann would surreptitiously blow the fur of the woman's sleeve back to check the quality and authenticity of her coat (RM and KP).

Sandy's relationship with his mother, while not as openly adversarial as that with his father, was still rather troubled and complex. Danny Meisner, Robert's son, remembers that his grandmother “definitely reveled” in her son's fame and that Sanford struggled to pull away from an overbearing mother who would “never let that happen.” Danny speculates that his uncle's two failed marriages were attempts to gain the approval of an autocratic Bertha.

In his taped interviews, Robert remembers his elder brother's relationship with the Meisner parents: “He hated my father and loved my mother. I think he loved her very much. She was a tough, horrible lady--very beautiful, but she was tough.” In fact, it is the matriarch of the Meisner family who serves as the source of one of the more touching recollections found in Robert's tapes:

I'll never forget the day she died. I was in her apartment. Sandy left about a half hour or so before, and I called up and spoke with Jimmy and said my mother died. And I heard Jimmy say, 'Sandy, your mother died.' Then, I heard these horrible shrieks--just shrieks--and Jimmy said, 'Don't touch anything. He's coming right back.' And he came back and he just looked at my mother and that was his grieving. (RM and HB)

Robert Meisner, like his older brother before him, would also choose to draw on imagination to deal with his inner feelings of unrest. By his own admission, he would often fantasize that he was “Sandy's illegitimate son,” and would fear that his brother thought he was

the re-incarnation of little Jacob come back from the grave to haunt him for having caused his death (RM and TR).

As a result of a family dynamic which the Meisner men simply refer to as “strange,” Robert and his brother would never become close. Instead, much of Sanford Meisner's family life would come to be defined by the loss of one brotherly relationship and the almost complete absence of another. Perhaps it is the void left by these brothers, his biological partners in a sense, that led the brilliant acting teacher to devise a method that is based entirely on cultivating intensely connected partnerships.

Nearly every meaningful relationship that Meisner developed grew out of his role as a teacher. He created a world out of the partnerships he helped build in class—a world which consisted primarily of students turned spouses, lovers, friends, enemies, or colleagues. Danny Meisner remembers when he was given the rare opportunity to cross over from one family to the other:

I passed him as he was coming out of the elevator in the Theatre where I was taking classes from him. He gave this look to me--like I was suddenly part of his family now. Even though we shared a last name, and even though we were related, it was not until I studied at the Playhouse that Sandy and I became family. (D. Meisner)

In devoting his life to the craft of teaching actors, Sanford Meisner enjoyed the family that he could never allow himself to have in life. In a little room known simply as 3B, with a

huge desk and thirty chairs, he was able to feel like his life made sense. He was able to forget his intense guilt and pain and, within those unassuming Neighborhood Playhouse walls, he was able to be free.

Chapter Two: Behind the Repetition

For those who have even the most rudimentary knowledge of the Meisner approach, the mere mention of Sanford Meisner's name conjures up images of a pair of actors engaged in the tedious repetition exercises for which the prolific acting teacher is best known. So synonymous with these foundational exercises is he that his name has become an adjective to employ when describing one person repeating another.

Surprising, given how inextricably linked to these exercises he would become, is the fact that they were developed by Meisner fairly far into an already established teaching career. Meisner, who began teaching acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York in 1935 taught for some twenty-three years before he even began to develop these famous exercises. In truth, some of Meisner's most well-known students never took part in the exercises at all.

Tony Randall, who became a student at the Neighborhood Playhouse in 1937, just two years into Meisner's tenure there, tells an interviewer that “Mr. Meisner was a legend already.” When asked to describe the Meisner Technique, Randall goes on to say:

It changed so radically over the years that I have no real understanding or familiarity with what he was teaching toward the end. He developed a whole system of exercises where people would talk back and forth to each other very rapidly in what seemed a nonsensical

manner. I never understood it. I never knew what he was doing; what we learned was something very different than that. (RM and TR)

Although the Neighborhood Playhouse is widely considered to be the “home of the Meisner Technique,” Meisner had only just begun to develop his flagship exercises, which he referred to as “the Word Repetition Game,” when a creative dispute with the administration motivated him to leave the Neighborhood Playhouse in 1959 (Meisner 22). The trouble, says Meisner’s then assistant, Mordecai Lawner, arose when Meisner and the Director of the school, Rita Morgenthau, disagreed on whether the Playhouse should serve as the “constituent acting program of Lincoln Center.” A “very excited” Meisner had personal stake in the venture, as he was offered a position teaching “not just in a two-year conservatory, but in a four-year baccalaureate and a Master’s program.” In a personal interview, Lawner shares:

Of course, it was not for him to decide...Mrs. Morgenthau turned him down...because she had certain...big grants...dependent on the fact that she was independent. She was afraid that if she gave that up and then the Lincoln Center deal folded..., she’d be left out in the rain. He was terribly upset about that...Having gone out to Hollywood to teach some directors and producers the Technique, he fired back a letter that was his resignation.

Lawner recalls that, just before the fall-out, “Sandy was actually cooking up this new exercise...I can remember vividly the moment in class when I was sitting with him...and he proposed...just to improvise something with him and to throw it back and forth and it was the beginning, the germination, of Repetition.”

Meisner would go on to leave for Hollywood, where he would continue to experiment with his new exercise. He would not stay gone for very long, however. In his mere five years away from the school that would eventually become his professional home for a total of almost fifty years, he served as director of the New Talent Division of Twentieth Century Fox before making the move back to New York to help form the American Musical Theatre Academy, where he was head of the acting department (Stinespring 6).

By 1964, AMTA had gone “belly up” and Meisner wished to return to the Neighborhood Playhouse. Owing to the impending retirement of an ailing Rita Morgenthau who would die later that year, his transition back into his old position was surprisingly uncomplicated. Upon his return, he, along with several assistants with whom he had been developing his exercises, began teaching what would eventually become known, quite simply, as the Repetition (Lawner).

While being interviewed for the *Yale Drama Review*, Meisner, in referring to what he calls “his basic premise,” explains that the purpose of these preliminary exercises is to instill in his actors one of his fundamental beliefs that “what you do doesn't depend on you--it depends on the other fellow.” Meisner contends that truthful acting can only be achieved if the actor focuses all of his efforts on reacting to his scene partner (Shepherd 40).

The appeal of Meisner's tenets is not a mystery. In the world of acting, which is so heavily dominated by the self-obsessed, the concept of an actor focusing his attention on someone other than himself seems a novel one. In contrast, the type of work usually done by practitioners of "the Method," is dependent on the actor being rather introverted and concerned with his summoning of emotions internally rather than with coming by them in a truly spontaneous way. In an essay in *Method Acting Reconsidered*, Brant L. Pope discusses what makes Meisner's approach so unique:

From the very first repetition exercises, the Meisner approach emphasized working off the other person...This concentration (perhaps obsession is the better word) with the other encourages shared and unselfish energy that flows from the actor for a particular and specific affect on the other actor(s)...By placing primary importance on the behavior of the other person(s) in a scene, the Meisner approach removes the overlay of self-indulgence that has often been associated with Method acting. (148-49)

It is, undoubtedly, the "Word Repetition Game" which garnered Meisner the bulk of the attention he received in the latter stages of his career. Still, an eighty-one year old Meisner, in a showing of typical contrariness, entered the office of Neighborhood Playhouse Director Harold Baldridge after a particularly difficult class to tell him rather nonchalantly, "You know, I think maybe I'll drop this repetition stuff." Baldridge, in a quick attempt to dissuade his former teacher from abandoning the exercises for which he is most widely known, told Meisner, "You

can't. You've become world-famous for this exercise. You gotta hang onto it.” Much to Baldrige's relief, Meisner simply laughed and exited the office, thereby putting an end to any discussion of dropping the acclaimed exercises (RM and HB).

In an interview for this project, Harold Baldrige, who still serves as Director of the Neighborhood Playhouse, has this to say of the incident:

Yeah, he did that. I mean, that's how his mind worked, though. He was always trying things, you know, and sometimes, you thought, 'Why's he doing that? It's sort of antithetical to what he believes in'...He had a very inquiring mind and he was always dealing with *that* particular actor and *that* particular actor's problems.

The contradictions brought about by Meisner's incessant need to address an individual actor's shortcomings are further evidenced in the footage of his master class. As he coaches a struggling student, Meisner freely admits, “I'm telling you. This is the worst kind of direction, so go ahead and do it” (MMC). Similarly, Meisner can be observed imposing the rules of the Repetition, only to appear to allow them to be broken moments later. When asked about these inconsistencies, former Meisner student and successful teacher of the Technique, Larry Silverberg, informs, “Everything is okay as long as it is not a manipulation of the exercise” (class).

Meisner, himself, does not mince words when addressing his students on the urgent need for them to keep up with the changes in the exercises: “I think there's been a general tendency with many of you to pretend to understand when you don't know what's going on. I don't mind

your not understanding, but you're a fool if you don't admit it. You're putting your ego above your need to learn" (MMC).

In the end, the malleable nature of the exercises themselves would come to reflect their creator's penchant for constant evolution. As Meisner grew as an instructor, so, too, did the Repetition as an exercise. In fact, it is widely reported that the master teacher was experimenting with his Technique until the very moment he was forced to retire in his late eighties. While his signature exercises were, undoubtedly, made more effective with each change, their constant state of flux has resulted in a cavernous divide among teachers who studied with Meisner at varying points in his six-decade career. This division has contributed to the Meisner Technique's status as, perhaps, the most misunderstood of all Acting approaches.

Chapter 3: From the Repetition to the First Scene

MEISNER: *What's the first thing that happens when they build the World Trade Center—you know that building?*

MALE STUDENT: *They dig a hole.*

MEISNER: *Well, of course they dig a hole. They don't glue it to the sidewalk! [Laughter.] What's the first thing they did when they built the Empire State Building?*

FEMALE STUDENT: *They had to put down a foundation first.*

MEISNER: *They had to put down a foundation on which. . .*

FEMALE STUDENT: *. . .they built the building.*

MEISNER: *. . .they built the building.* (Meisner 17)

There are many phases in the progression of Meisner's Repetition, each designed to facilitate a deeper emotional connection between participants than did the previous one. The unusual nature of these deceptively simple exercises has prompted many actors and teachers to lose sight of the fact that they were originally intended to be *training* exercises and were meant to be a means to an end and never as an end in themselves (Pollack xv). Too many practitioners seem to be unaware that, in a two-year curriculum designed by Meisner during his time at the Playhouse, only the first year is dominated by the Repetition. During the second year, which is

devoted largely to character preparation and scripted scene work, students are guided in the practical application of the principles of Repetition to their work with text.

One of the “pitfalls” of the Technique, it seems, is the clarity with which most students learn the foundational exercises. Long-time Meisner assistant and esteemed teacher of the Technique, William Esper, complains:

The beginning exercises are easy to learn and easy to teach. This attracts a lot of under-qualified practitioners. They teach versions of Repetition and claim that they’re teaching Meisner’s work without progressing to the next steps, all of which are necessary to build genuinely accomplished actors capable of creating characters with deep and compelling inner lives. (9)

Esper’s sentiment is shared by Harold Baldridge, who, when asked what he considers to be the most common misconception about the Technique, does not hesitate to answer, “That Repetition is the answer, which it *ain’t*! It’s an exercise...to make habits of...emotional muscles and brain muscles. But, a lot of people think it’s the end...” (Baldridge, personal int.).

Mordecai Lawner, a former Meisner assistant who is best known for his turn as Woody Allen’s father in *Annie Hall*, expounds upon the problem of the Technique being far more cumulative than many teachers acknowledge:

Too often, the Repetition is represented by people as a panacea. Go through the Repetition and you’ll be a *Meisner* actor. You’ll break through the egg and jump out! You’ll come out of the cocoon as a butterfly and a full-fledged actor and that’s not it at

all! I've gone to...final demonstrations [of Meisner classes]...and I was very disappointed because it was as if, "Okay. We did the Repetition a year and a half ago..., now we can go back to the old stuff...and always, what Sandy would come back to is, "Where is the connection?" (int.)

The introductory stage of the famed Repetition, which is the most commonly taught phase, calls for two partners to sit a "comfortable conversational distance" apart from each other. Partner A will verbalize a superficial observation of Partner B. The two will repeat the initial observation until something happens to make them change it. This will go on for an indefinite period of time (Stinespring 89).

The Repetition builds as the students become more confident. Invariably, students will move past the thin tether of their surface observations and will experience a stronger connection as their insight grows deeper. At this stage, "actors no longer take 'inventory' of the other actor superficially, but observe the scene-partner's emotions, feelings, and thoughts" (Krasner 158).

In short, what begins as, "You have a blue shirt," may eventually evolve into "You are upset." This progression is facilitated by the introduction of an exercise Meisner calls "The Three-Moment Game." The game, which has two phases, is designed to help actors isolate behavior (Silverberg 34). As the name suggests, there should be three distinct moments between the pair of participants. The first moment arises when Partner A asks Partner B a provocative question. The second moment comes when Partner B immediately repeats, *but does not answer*, the question. The third and final moment occurs when Partner A verbalizes his observations of Partner B's behavior during the repetition of the question.

In his book, *The Sanford Meisner Approach: Workbook One*, Larry Silverberg offers this example:

Partner A: Does anyone really love you?

Partner B: Does anyone really love me? (*As she repeated the question, her eyes looked away, she smiled and giggled.*)

Partner A: (*Working aloud...*) Well, there was a gleam in your eyes, but you didn't want me to see it. Your face got red; it's still red. I think the question really embarrassed you, yeah, that was the strongest thing I got. (*He ends with a simple, direct statement to her.*) That embarrassed you.

End of game. (28)

The next phase of the “Three-Moment Game” is exactly the same as the introductory format, save the removal of Partner A’s working aloud. The third moment of the above example would then be, “That embarrassed you.” When the third moment happens immediately, the urge to ‘get it right’ disappears, making way for the *truth of the moment*, which does not necessarily correspond with *absolute truth*. In essence, Partner A does not have to be correct in order to be truthful. If Partner B is, in fact, not embarrassed, as her partner claimed, the contradiction will present a new moment. Consequently, at this stage, the third moment will now lead the partners into the Repetition exercise (Silverberg 35). The Repetition will now change when one partner observes something new in the behavior of the other partner.

The next step in the Repetition is known simply as “Coming to the Door,” and brings the first introduction of Meisner’s “imaginary circumstances.” Again, this phase is often rushed by

teachers of the Technique. In the initial “Coming to the Door” exercise, neither partner has an objective, a scenario, or an activity. The only element added to the Repetition at this juncture is that one partner imagines that the playing space is his or her own room and that the second partner knocks on the door to the room. The Repetition, as students have known it, will commence upon the answering of the door.

Silverberg explains, “The only difference is that you are not in your seats—you are at the door. The door opens and you ‘take the first thing’ and off you go...you accept as a given that the door is always locked” (51).

The next phase of “Coming to the Door” requires one of the partners to engage in an “independent activity.” In the very beginning of this work, the activities are simple and do not have any back story or emotional meaning attached to them. For example, Partner B may be balancing a wooden dowel on her fingertip or she may need to keep a basketball spinning on the finger of her less dominant hand. Partner B is now charged with *mastering* the task at hand while still participating in the Repetition. Partner A, who comes to the door, is expected to “function from the unconscious. Because if their full concentration is on the partner, they have nothing left with which to watch themselves or consciously control their responses (Esper 117).

At this point, Meisner instructs students to take care to ensure that they are always reacting “in proportion” to one another (MMC). This proportionality is the philosophy behind his concept of “The Pinch and the Ouch.” Simply put, an actor needs only to respond to the given stimulus, rather than giving into the self-imposed pressure of making it into something more than it is. Doing so rings immediately false to both the actors and the audience. To further illustrate the notion of “The Pinch and the Ouch,” Meisner, as captured on film by Sydney

Pollack, tickles a student very lightly. When the student, per Meisner's instruction, reacts as though he has been tickled relentlessly and for quite some time, the point is made.

In regard to the issue of reacting disproportionately in the exercises, it should be noted that activities in the latter stages of the work must be what Meisner calls "genuine tasks." This means that activities should be such that, given the right set of circumstances, the actor would undertake them in his or her own room. At this point, the element of truth must have great meaning to the student. "Most often, that which has great meaning to us is a person" (Silverberg class).

To this end, students are cautioned to avoid "bar game" types of activities, as the justification for doing them is almost always to win an imaginary contest. The stakes of such a circumstance lack the personal significance needed at this stage because contests are too general; everyone likes to win them. Students who have chosen such activities often succumb to the pressure to *indicate* their significance in a jarringly presentational way, thereby having a much bigger "ouch" than the "pinch" genuinely evokes.

During the next stage of "Coming to the Door," the independent activity must have a specific physical difficulty and a clear "beginning, middle, and end" (Krasner 158). It is important to note that, like most of Meisner's exercises, this phase is often either accelerated or overlooked. Many teachers mistakenly jump to emotional preparation at this stage although, in order to avoid any urge to "act," students should first become accustomed to working off of each other while simply pursuing the completion of the activity while the Repetition is maintained. At this juncture, there is no emotional significance attached to the activity.

From this point forward, it is imperative that the nature of the independent activity is not disclosed between partners. Doing so eliminates the possibility for a first moment free of

expectation. It should also be noted that, each time the partners work, the incoming partner should give the other actor time to become fully engaged in his or her activity before knocking.

After the actors have grown familiar with the initial phases of “Coming to the Door,” Partner B is instructed to construct a “simple and specific” reason he/she must complete the activity. This reason must have an “element of truth” for the actor, but cannot be rooted in something that has already taken place. For instance, Partner B may imagine that she has broken her mother’s coffee cup and needs to glue it back together (Silverberg class).

In order for this premise to have an element of truth, the actor must, indeed, have a living mother who does, in fact, drink coffee. If the actor’s mother is already deceased, the set-up is problematic from the start. If she is alive, but detests coffee, the actor is burdened to *invent* attachment to her activity, rather than simply to allow the attachment to take hold naturally. The imaginary circumstance in this example comes from the fact that the actor has not, in actuality, broken her mother’s cup. She has endowed the cup with significance and, therefore, the emotional stakes are a bit higher than they are in the previous stage of this exercise.

The partner who knocks does not yet have a reason to go to the door. He/she must only remain receptive to the other partner during the Repetition. On the issue of having a “sense of urgency,” teachers have differing opinions on when to utilize time limits. It is this writer’s opinion that, at each phase of the independent activity work, participants should become familiar with the increased meaning of the set-up before they give themselves deadlines. A sense of urgency should never come at the expense of an actor’s ability to truly connect with his/her experience.

Too often, students impose time limits prematurely, with the result being that they play at being rushed, rather than giving themselves over to the activity. To a student who is struggling

with just such an instance, Larry Silverberg advises, “You must do the thing you must do and nothing must get in the way. You mustn’t spin your wheels. The quality of your acting depends on what we are doing fully.”

Silverberg, addressing the addition of the time limit, asserts, “The person in the room must build urgency into the activity. Think about the time it would normally take to complete and then shorten it. If it takes an hour, shorten it to fifteen minutes. It may look like it is nearly impossible, but if there is a way in Hell, do it. Just make it pressing” (class).

In this writing, for the sake of clarity, each progression in the independent activity work will be represented with an adjustment to the coffee cup scenario. It must be noted, however, that each time an actor participates in this work, an entirely new activity must be built. Also for the purposes of clarity, the partner who has created the independent activity will always be referred to as Partner B and the incoming partner will always be Partner A.

Following the “simple and specific” stage, actors are asked to construct activities with reasons that are “a little more important.” Building on the previous example, the coffee cup must not simply belong to the actor’s mother, but may be the mother’s *favorite* cup. Perhaps, it was made for her by one of her children.

The increased importance of the object will add to the importance of completing the activity and will deepen the level of interaction between participants. As is always the case, actors are instructed to play the Repetition, but to give full attention to their activities until their partners do something that genuinely pulls their focus. Meisner’s mantra is ever present: “Never do anything unless the other fellow makes you do it” (MMC).

Following the “a little more important” stage, students are charged with imbuing their activities with a reason which holds extreme personal significance. This phase of “Coming to

the Door,” aptly titled “In the Extreme,” signifies the introduction of “imaginary circumstances” for the person who knocks at the door. Larry Silverberg explains this addition:

Up until now, the second partner has been coming to the door simply because they’ve been told to. At this point, the incoming partner needs a simple and specific reason to choose to come to the door. What must you do about it once you’re inside? Nothing. You just know it. It may never come up. This is not about playing your objective. As Meisner said, ‘It’s not about showing; it’s about knowing.’ (Silverberg class)

For example, at this stage in the Repetition, Partner B may imagine that she had been promising to fix her mother’s broken coffee cup, but had procrastinated doing so. Now, as her mother lay in the hospital dying from injuries sustained in an automobile crash, Partner B must glue the cup back together before her sister comes to take her to say goodbye to their mother. (If this is the second time Partner B has participated in “In the Extreme,” perhaps it would also be imagined that there are only ten minutes before the sister comes.)

Partner A, who is not expected by Partner B, is coming over to borrow sugar to make brownies. The issue of the sugar may never be addressed. It simply serves to give Partner A the slightest bit of an imagined “moment before” so that, when the Repetition begins, it comes from a place of discovery.

The role of imagination becomes increasingly important as this work progresses and, therefore, the requirements of the set-ups change slightly. The adjustments that take place at this phase of the Repetition serve as a bridge between Meisner’s structured improvisations and scripted scenework. The added elements of imagination are introduced gradually so the actors

do not abandon their connection to each other and to their impulses when they are tasked with imagining someone else's words are their own. "After all, if words were enough, there would be no such thing as bad Shakespeare" (Robichaux class).

While Partner B's instructions remain the same, Partner A will make the next few adjustments. Just as Partner B has moved from the realm of "simple and specific" to "a little more important" and then, finally, to "in the extreme," so, too, will Partner A. Instead of coming over for sugar, Partner A may knock because she needs to borrow the video camera so that she might catch the person who has been vandalizing her yard as she sleeps. For the next exercise, Partner A may imagine that she is coming over because her father has just died. Again, the actor should resist the urge to "do anything about the reason. You should simply know it and see what that does to you" (Silverberg class).

When the actors reach the point that calls for both of their premises to be in the realm of "In the Extreme," the connection between the partners frequently becomes nearly electric in its intensity. The gradual progression of the exercises has been building up the actors' ability to stay truly connected to their imaginary circumstances while still living truthfully with each other—through the Repetition.

This work is sometimes quite emotionally demanding, but because the actors' imaginations have been trained, it is both healthy and sustainable. In stark contrast to Strasberg's concept of Affective Memory, for example, students are not being put at risk by drawing on traumatic things that have already happened. Instead, they are utilizing things that *could* happen, which provides them with a much safer and immediate way of "stepping out" when the exercise is over.

After both partners have been working with each other “In the Extreme,” the element of imaginary relationships is first introduced. Until now, the relationship between the two partners has been, in the exercises, whatever it is in life—no more and no less. They have known each other onstage as they know each other in reality. At this point, it is mutually imagined that the partners have a “simple and specific” relationship. Larry Silverberg explains this addition:

The incoming person’s reason must have nothing to do with Partner B, who is in the room. Something extreme has just happened and you are knocking right after. Leave alone the reason you came to the door. Together, you will add a simple and specific relationship in which you do not live together. You don’t have to create a history. You just have to know the relationship (class).

While the partners decide on how they know each other, they should not have pre-conceived notions of how they feel about each other. In short, they will know their relationship, but not *how* they relate to one another. That is for them to discover during the exercise. For example, they may imagine that they are co-workers, but *what kind* of co-worker relationship they have remains to be seen. Adding the element of relationship without attaching the element of history allows us to escape the cliché of what we think constitutes a relationship (LS class).

At this point in the work, Partner B also adds “expectancy,” meaning that she must imagine that someone other than her partner is coming to the door. This person should be at the “simple and specific” level. For example, she may be expecting the cable guy. When she opens the door anticipating the cable guy, but finding her co-worker, the realization will be incorporated into the first moment of the Repetition.

Partner A, who has been “daydreaming” until she feels connected enough to her imaginary circumstances to motivate a knock, will have her own reaction to finding her partner fixated on an urgent activity (Esper 198). As always, Partner B must pursue the completion of her activity while still engaging with her partner via the Repetition. Everything that has been done previously remains, but is being built upon.

Unlike the usual progression of elements from the “simple and specific” phase, the nature of the imagined relationship between the two partners will not become more meaningful in the next few stages. This is because, with an increase in personal significance to each other, the actors would need to create an involved shared history with one another. Doing so would force them to deal with too many external factors and would preclude their ability to know the relationship “and then forget about it” (LS class).

By keeping the relationship simple in the structured improvisations, actors are free to live in the moment. By the time they are dealing with the shared history of scripted characters, this work will have connected them to their impulses so their work onstage is as alive as was their work in the classroom.

While the students do not invent intricate histories, they still must ensure that they are working from a common place of knowing. They do this by sharing with each other any details that could potentially come up in the exercise. For example, if they imagine that they are lovers, it stands to reason that they would know each other’s families. If Partner B’s reason for her activity is tied to her mother, she may inform Partner A of her mother’s name before the exercise.

So there is no expectation of addressing the information during the work, two “red herrings”—things that would, in all probability, never come up—are also shared. For example,

Partner B may say to Partner A, “I drive a Toyota. I am allergic to peanuts. My mother’s name is Joan.” Partner A then lets this information go. If, for some reason, Partner B blurts out, “My mother is dying,” Partner A is working from a place of knowing and might then say “Oh, Joan” (Silverberg class).

In the next stages of “Coming to the Door,” Partner A’s reason for the knock is directly related to Partner B, while Partner B’s “In the Extreme” activity still has nothing to do with Partner A. First, the incoming partner goes through the progression of *simple and specific* connections (i.e. “I came over because I made an appreciation gift for my partner because he watched my cat.”) to *a little more important* (“I came over because I wanted to apologize to you for insulting your husband.”) to *in the extreme* (“I came over because I suspect you molested my child and I want to confront you.”).

It makes for a very dynamic connection when one person is coming into the space for a specific purpose, while the other must complete an activity for an extremely important reason. The connection grows deeper still when Partner B is given the instruction that her activity must now correlate to Partner A. Eventually, the two partners will equip themselves with imaginary circumstances which are designed to allow them to enter the playing space in a state of fullness, before the exercise even starts. Most often, when the Repetition does begin, the connection is already so strong that something very authentic passes between them.

Eventually, the Repetition will evolve so that both actors are “In the Extreme.” Partner A comes to the door because of an extremely meaningful reason that concerns Partner B. Partner B is constructing an activity that is somehow tied to Partner A. At this final stage of the Repetition, the game is virtually unrecognizable as such. Students have become so skilled at ‘taking the first thing’ that they are living moment to moment and, therefore, new observations are being spoken

at nearly every turn. They still maintain the tether of the Repetition, but they honor their impulses so fully that the exercise sounds much more conversational than it has at any point before.

After the evolution of the Repetition is completed, students are now free to work off of each other in a place of deep connectedness. It is at this point in the training that two-person scripted scenes are assigned. An often over-looked tenet of the Meisner Technique is that actors should memorize their lines by rote, meaning that they should learn them without any sort of pre-conceived notions of how they should be spoken.

To accomplish this, Meisner developed a system of “mechanical reading” that, while extraordinarily tedious, is a necessary bridge between the structured improvisations and work with text. Without this step, the transition is often so abrupt that actors abandon the work they have been doing up to this point and return to their old habits (Silverberg class).

Students, who are not permitted to choose their own scenes, must copy their entire scenes (both their partner’s lines and their own) by hand. They are instructed to omit every bit of punctuation, capitalization, and italicization. Stage directions are also eliminated. The goal of doing this is to give the actor the cleanest slate possible from which to begin the work.

Once the actors have created their “mechanical reading script,” they memorize their lines by speaking them to their scene partners in a “relaxed and easy manner...syllable by syllable.” Larry Silverberg provides a phonetic example, taken from the play *The Legend of Sarah*, in the third book of his Meisner series:

Adam: what-in-gods-name-do-you-think-youre-do-ing

Minerva: im-pack-ing-dont-you-have-an-y-eyes-in-your-head-im-packing

Adam: well-you-can-stop-pack-ing-stop-it-right-now

Minerva: out-of-my-way

Adam: youre-be-ing-re-dic-u-lous-its-late-and-hotels-are-ex-pen-ive

Minerva: im-not-go-ing-to-a-ho-tel-im-go-ing-home (54).

It is important to note that each syllable should be uttered with ease and that the reading should be fluid, rather than staccato. The actors should not sound like robots, but should allow the air of one breath to flow evenly as they speak. When the breath runs out, the actor takes another breath and picks up where he/she left off. They should not speak with any inflection. At this point, the actors, who are sitting across from one another, do not look at each other. They only listen (Silverberg class).

After the mechanical reading, the actors will take part in a “working reading,” which is designed to allow them to continue listening to each other while removing the element of going from syllable to syllable. They should “really talk and really listen,” as though their characters’ lines are their own. Ideally, they are learning to “pick up the impulse, not the cue” (MMC). At this stage, the actors not only look at each other, but they may only speak while maintaining eye contact with their partners. Again, Larry Silverberg explains this addition:

1. Once again, sit at the table directly across from your partner.
2. Have your scripts in front of you. (For this reading, it is a good idea to hold the script in one hand and with the other hand, keep a finger running along with the words you are reading so that when you need to, you can easily find the place where you left off...)

3. Without saying anything, get in contact with your partner. Just be with each other for a few moments.
4. Whoever has the first line will go down to the script and get some words. You get as many as you can remember. Then, look back at your partner and, with those words, talk to your partner. Go back and get some more words and, once again, look back at your partner and talk to your partner. Do this until you have spoken the entire line.
5. Then the other person goes down to the script, gets some words, looks back at the partner and speaks.
6. Continue through the entire scene in this manner (Silverberg, “Workbook Three” 3, 59).

Once partners have gotten off-book through several “working readings,” the scene is ready to get on its feet. During the first assigned scene, actors are not encouraged to read the play in its entirety. The scenes simply serve as scripted improvisations and are meant to be exercises rather than performances. No blocking will be set and actors are encouraged to follow their impulses and to move, speak, and react as they are inspired to.

When the actors “go up” on their lines, they are encouraged to employ the Repetition to lead them back to the script. This will keep them in the moment and connected to their characters instead of wrenching them out of their inner lives like calling, “Line!” can sometimes do. This practice is so effective in bringing the actor back to the text because most instances of an actor’s inability to recall memorized lines can be attributed to a loss in connection. An actor simply cannot keep hold of unmotivated text. Going into the Repetition allows the connection between partners to deepen so that the text is allowed to take root.

Meisner's approach calls for specific exercises to help with emotional preparation and scripted pieces meant for performance, but the value of the partner remains the same. Through each phase of the work, an actor must always work off of his/her other, taking the first thing as quickly as it comes. Eventually, working in this way will result in stage performances so deeply connected that actors do not have to exert any undue effort to "keep things fresh." New discoveries are there if you simply listen and pay attention.

Chapter Four: Teaching Meisner

“Acting is an art. And teaching acting is an art, too, or it can be. Ultimately, it’s a question of talent—of theirs meshing with mine. So, time will tell. But I must say, it’s good to begin again” (Meisner 25).

The act of teaching played a crucial role in the life of Sanford Meisner, who taught in some capacity until he was in his very late eighties. So essential was it for him to continue teaching that he persevered through invasive surgeries, accidents, and various other health problems to do so. Quite simply, he taught because he could not keep himself from teaching, nor could he allow anything else to keep him from it.

In a rare and revealing interview with a former student, Meisner likens himself to French painter Raoul Dufy:

When he was in his eighties his hands were so crippled with arthritis that he couldn’t hold the brush. Well, he got someone to tape it onto his hand somehow, and he kept on painting. Now, with all my limitations—I can’t talk, my eyes are bad—I come back to this freezing city to teach again! Some people think they’ve talked me into it. That’s not so. No one can talk me into anything that I don’t want to do. I want to do it. I’m happiest when I’m teaching. (Shepherd 42-43, qtd. in Longwell 13)

Knowing how vital teaching was to the man who created this technique, I developed a tremendous sense of responsibility to honor him in my own pursuit to become a “Meisner teacher.” Additionally, the information I learned while delving into Sanford Meisner’s personal life left me with the feeling that I almost knew the master teacher. It was as if I had met him somehow and consequently, I wanted to do all that I could to be deserving of the privilege to continue his life’s work. Former Meisner student and acclaimed teacher of the Technique, Suzanne Shepherd, remarks on this pressure:

The total sense and perfect truth of every stepping stone in those two unforgettable years of classes intoxicated me with a fervor that led me to teach. No one, no one, no one can teach like Sandy. But with a kind of messianic zeal, I presented his exercises as clearly and carefully as I could and, through many years of teaching, my understanding of the profundity and resonance of his work deepened. But every year,...I became anxious, insecure, sleepless and fearful that I might make a mess of it. (“Preface” viii)

Perhaps I should take some sort of comfort in the fact that even an accomplished actor and teacher like Ms. Shepherd can succumb to a bit of self doubt when faced with the looming task of doing Meisner justice. I cannot help but wonder, however, what hope I could possibly have if even she finds difficulty in my chosen pursuit. As is the case with most things, though, I realized that I would never get any answers until I took some action.

I knew that I expressly did not want to be one of those teachers who professes to be an expert when, in reality, she can claim only a cursory knowledge of the Technique that she

parlays into a meal ticket. My first step in the quest to avoid such a fate would be to find out if such a thing as a legitimate “Meisner teacher” even exists and, provided it does, what steps I should have to take to become one.

First, I endeavored to learn if it is possible to be a second generation teacher. In essence, I wanted to know if I missed my chance to be a respected teacher of the Technique because the man who developed it died before I had an opportunity to study with him. I instinctively knew that I needed to get as close to the source as possible, so it was imperative that I seek out a mentor who had, in fact, studied with Meisner himself. It was this notion that would eventually lead me to Larry Silverberg and his True Acting Institute at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida.

I must admit that Silverberg’s program was not my first choice. Initially, I assumed, quite logically, that the best place to learn the Technique would be The Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, where Meisner developed and taught his approach for a combined total of nearly five decades. In a personal interview for this project, Harold Baldridge opines:

In the estimations of our teachers, including myself, there are a lot of people out there who are teaching what doesn’t have a lot to do with Meisner anymore. It has a hell of a lot to do with them. They have taken the book and the name and sort of done what they wanted to do with it, whereas...I have four acting teachers right now who were all trained by Mr. Meisner, so it’s coming from the trunk of the tree. As near as you can get to the tree when it’s dead, you know?

After the Playhouse, I considered renowned Meisner teacher, William Esper, who teaches at his own studio in New York. Esper, who studied under Meisner for nearly twenty years, has, by most accounts, an unparalleled grasp of the Technique, and I was eager to train with him. Larry Silverberg, who has written five books on Meisner's system and has had tremendous commercial success, held the third and final slot.

Initially, I was a bit skeptical of Silverberg, as his time with Meisner lasted only the duration of the Playhouse's two-year certificate program and did not involve an apprentice or assistant position. Even though he had gone on to study with Suzanne Shepherd, I wondered how proficient he could be, given that he had never been groomed by Meisner to teach the Technique. I also had concerns that, while supremely convenient, a condensed curriculum made up of two two-week sessions over consecutive summers may only give me a fraction of the understanding I sought. Additionally, I pondered whether or not the very idea of a Meisner intensive is "antithetical to Meisner's teaching" (Paul).

Former Meisner assistant Mordecai Lawner, when asked his opinion of Silverberg's program, shares this skepticism:

I don't know anything about him and perhaps it's unfair of me to say, but that kind of thing you just described chills my blood and I have heard it too much from other people who have come from Meisner. I would label it as opportunism. They see where the payoff is and people all over the country have become enamored of the very name

In the end, simple logistics would win out. Timing limited me to studying over the summer between school years, so undertaking a two-year program in New York was, at least for

now, out of the question. While I learned that both Bill Esper and the Neighborhood Playhouse offer summer intensives that are similar in price to Silverberg's, neither of the two provide room and board, as does Silverberg's. Additionally, the True Acting Institute's program is geared to professionals who wish to teach the Meisner Technique. All of these factors led me to pack my bags for Florida and table my goal of eventually training at the two New York locations.

Silverberg's program began with a welcome dinner in the campus cafeteria. Over noodles and salad, we not only met Larry, but also his wife, son, and daughter. As Silverberg explained, "It's a family business," and each Silverberg does his or her part to help the program succeed. While I did find this quite charming, I must admit that, at first, the emphasis on family added to my wariness. I wondered if this was not an upscale version of the all too prevalent under-qualified acting teachers who conduct classes in makeshift studios in their homes. I do realize how jaded this seems, but, in the name of honesty, I feel it is important that I make mention of my initial misgivings.

At this dinner, we, of course, also met each other: the students with whom we would be sharing dormitories, meals, and classes. It felt eerily similar to the start of my freshman year in college—and not just because of the setting. It was made clear from the beginning that we would be spending nearly every waking moment with one another and that our continued places in the program were contingent upon our respect of each other. Silverberg gently informed us that any misbehavior would result in our immediate dismissal; no refunds would be paid. After some socializing, we set off to our rooms to get a good night's rest before the work began the following morning at 9:00 am. As I lay down on my twin bed in a stereotypical dorm room, I had no way of knowing that about a half hour into our training, each of my apprehensions about Silverberg would melt away.

A slight and soft-spoken man in his late sixties, Larry Silverberg commands the space with such intensity that I could not help but be awe-struck by the contrast. The unassuming, mild-mannered family man from the previous night's dinner had been replaced by a passionate and lively force of nature and the transformation was really something to behold. He was tireless; we would have ten to twelve hour days in the studio and he held up much better than any of the rest of us!

Of Silverberg's zeal, famed playwright and long-time Meisner friend Horton Foote, remarks, "Occasionally, I get discouraged about the direction our theater is taking today, but when someone surfaces with the vision, passion, and talent of Larry Silverberg, I am reassured" (xii).

From a pedagogical standpoint, I was struck most immediately by Larry's ability to be, at once, both warm and stern. While he does not intimidate, he also does not hold back. In short, it took me about thirty minutes to put my ego aside and give myself over to the wonderful truth that I was, in fact, in the presence of a master teacher. Quickly, my task became soaking up whatever wisdom I could during our time together. By the end of two short weeks, I would take 157 pages of notes and learn a great deal about the kind of teacher I would like to be. In that respect, I most certainly got my money's worth.

The best part of the bargain, however, was an element I could never have anticipated. The people I met as strangers in a dining hall would come to mean more to me than people I have known for the bulk of my life. At the time of this writing, it has been nine months since we left Eckerd College and I have spoken with at least one of the "Meisner Campers" every day. I walked away from my first summer in Florida with some of the most intensely connected friendships I have ever known and, for that alone, I could not be more grateful. To that end,

while I realize it is not an express goal of the program, I cannot help but feel that Larry has set things up in such a way that developing close bonds is nearly inevitable. The intimacy of the work, coupled with the tight living quarters and long hours, allowed us to lean on each other and turned the thirty of us into a fiercely protective family.

I feel compelled to note here that, had it been overseen by a lesser teacher, the same set-up could have been anywhere from problematic to downright dangerous. If not for Larry's clear requirements for the maintenance of respect, emotional safety, and compassion, we may not have understood our boundaries with one another. This could have resulted in the "working space" remaining unclosed and, consequently, the environment could have become antagonistic or stressful. As it stands, Larry's warmth and positivity, in conjunction with his ability to give honest criticism without malice, would prove contagious. We related to each other, both in class and in social settings, with a caring honesty I have never before encountered.

During the two weeks, which are designed to give us an abbreviated version of the first year of a two-year Meisner curriculum, we would be taken through the complete progression of the Repetition and would end with our first assigned scenes. We were also given opportunities to coach the exercises as Larry supervised. The end result, of course, is that we were able to grow both as actors and as teachers. Any doubts I had about Larry Silverberg's credibility would vanish and be replaced by sheer gratitude and respect.

I left Florida with a more involved understanding of what could have motivated Meisner to keep teaching, in spite of times when it must have seemed as though the universe had other plans for him. I was consumed by the possibilities—galvanized by the notion that I, too, could spend years working to reach students in an effort to aid them in their development into the actors that their proclivities and their potential necessitate.

Former Carnegie Mellon instructor and Meisner assistant Mordecai Lawner calls the root of this impulsion to teach “the teaching emotion.” In a personal conversation that I do not hesitate to consider the most inspiring exchange I have ever had on the art of teaching, Lawner imparts these words of wisdom:

It’s a special emotion, which is different than the emotion you feel for your mother or your father or your lover or your child or your country. Those are different emotions, but there is also a separate, different emotion for when you’re teaching and you see that the thing that you just said or did with that other person—whether you were directing them or had them in a scene or in a class or in an exercise—and you see the light bulb turn on. You feel a little bit like God, you know? You’ve opened up an understanding. That’s an emotion. It is the teaching emotion that I’ve felt in my life that makes living worthwhile. You’ll feel it. You’ll dedicate yourself to it. Doesn’t mean that you can’t be acting at the same time or directing or any of the other things, but you can be a pedagogue, too, except you’ll be a creative pedagogue.

With Mordecai Lawner’s words ringing in my ears, I set out to put my experience with Larry Silverberg to good use. As has proven to be the case throughout my journey, I could not have anticipated the dichotomous nature of my endeavor. In taking my efforts to the undergraduate students of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Theatre Department, I would be equal parts frustrated and thrilled. I would also become painfully aware of the differences in a private studio environment and a university atmosphere.

Chapter Five: Meisner In A University Setting

Fresh off of my experience with Larry Silverberg in Florida, I was eager to take my newly gained insight back to the Theatre Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. I successfully proposed an “Introduction to Meisner” course which I intended to be for freshman and sophomore Theatre Majors. Initially, I asked for two semesters for this course, but was informed that there would not be enough studio space to accommodate my request. Because of the restriction of having only one semester, I decided to implement an extended version of the intensive model used by Larry Silverberg in his True Acting Institute.

My first difficulty in the undertaking of Meisner in a university-sanctioned format would come in the form of a scheduling conflict. Because my time slot would coincide with Acting II for second year-majors, sophomores were unable to sign up for “Intro to Meisner.” Given that all of the juniors were already taking full class loads, they were taken out of the running, as well. With sophomores and juniors unable to take the course, and not enough interest in the freshman class, I was forced to open the course up to seniors. The presence of the seniors on the course roster would prove to be the single most problematic element of the semester.

The fourth-year Performance majors, in the last semester of their schooling, are in the throes of preparing themselves for lives and careers “in the real world.” Thankfully, VCU provides them with many opportunities to make easier the transition between student life and the professional world. These opportunities include several trips that result in the students being

taken out of classes, sometimes for days at a time, to either attend workshops or professional auditions. Given the cumulative nature of the Meisner work, these absences put the seniors at a huge disadvantage.

Whenever they would return from a department-sanctioned outing, we would have to spend at least one entire class day catching them up. This resulted in a very stilted progression of the system, as well as apparent resentment from the hard-working first-years who were being kept from moving forward at the pace they had set for themselves by attending classes regularly. It was frustrating for all involved and, while I understand the necessity of these senior excursions, I would not allow seniors into this class again. In an already accelerated curriculum, they were only able to be given a very superficial understanding of the Technique. As a teacher, I finally had to throw up my hands and accept that there was only so much I could do when attendance is such a huge problem.

Adding to the scheduling complications which accompanied the seniors' inclusion were the implications of status in the ensemble. I observed, many times, that the first years were treading lightly, presumably, because of some perceived pressure to keep from overstepping their bounds with the fourth-years. Given that this work is dependent upon the breaking down of walls and the following of impulses, these sociological barriers presented a formidable obstacle. With the seniors missing so often, this division was not softened by the desensitization that would have come from working together as frequently as the course demanded.

To combat this problem, I would pair the fourth and first-years together as often as was possible, in the hopes that the playing field would eventually be leveled. I would love to say that it worked, but while it did help, the seniors were most often quite dominant, while the freshmen

were frequently submissive. Without everyone on equal footing, the back-and-forth nature of Meisner's exercises was seldom truly achieved.

At the time of this writing, there is still a little over a month of class left and walls are being shifted every day, so my hope is that the dividing line will become a little more forgiving as they continue to work "In the Extreme" with each other. Only time will tell. My prediction is that, while the students will probably come to be more comfortable working with each other and challenging one another in the way that this work demands, they will only go so far in the way of genuinely releasing themselves from their inhibitions.

I believe that this is, in large part, because of the very nature of a university Theatre Department. Despite every instruction to the contrary, the students cannot help but feel as though the work they do with each other may carry over into their social circles. Owing to the fact that most of the exercises demand that the actors interact as themselves, it is quite difficult for college students to separate a particularly charged exercise from an actual argument between them.

To defuse any such tension, I have borrowed a trick I observed Larry Silverberg use. No matter how heated their exercises get, I always ask them to look each other in the eye and thank each other for the ride. This helps to remind them to put their egos aside so that nothing that happens in class has a lasting and personal impact on their relationships outside of class. Again, I am contending with the specific combination of student age and social dynamics inherent to a university setting, but I do find that it helps.

Another challenge that comes with teaching this work at a college is the general lack of life experience that the young students bring to the table. I realize that many students of this age may have dealt with personal tragedy and genuine difficulty, but I find that, as one would expect,

the “life library” of an older student provides much more from which to draw. The difference is never more evident than when actors are first asked to work “In the Extreme.”

When in class with Silverberg, the youngest person in the Meisner Teacher Certification course was twenty-seven. Most of the students ranged from their early forties to their mid-sixties and had been through the pain of the loss of employment, divorce, or the death of a parent. Because of having felt extreme anguish, they were able to imagine scenarios that would cause them similar agony. Consequently, the extreme scenarios that were conjured had to deal with saying goodbye to a dying ex-fiancé, striving to convey forgiveness to an ailing former friend-turned sexual aggressor, or learning a piece of music to play at a father’s funeral.

In contrast, many of the “In the Extreme” activities in the VCU class have continued to live in the realm of the second phase of “A Little More Important.” They have involved being late for a date with a “guy I really like,” “finally getting to have sex with this girl,” or “getting a really big part.” As the facilitator of the work, I have had to suggest to them that they need to dig deeper in order to truly connect to their imaginary circumstances, but I have had to take special care not to make them feel judged or misunderstood.

The truth is that, to them, these set-ups (and the consequences inherent to them) may be extreme. Most of them have not yet lived the kind of life-altering anguish or ecstasy that Meisner asks them to imagine. They do not yet have a scope for it, so I am often faced with the task of working within the confines of their sheltered worlds, while responsibly and carefully pushing the walls so that their worlds do get progressively bigger.

Sometimes, though, I have to realize when they are simply not emotionally ready to have those walls moved and, at that point, it becomes irresponsible for me to continue pushing. Just as Larry has said is his practice, it is at this juncture that I may suggest that they work on

themselves outside of class (either with a counselor, therapist, or clergyman) to address the reasons behind their tenacious maintenance of their barriers (Silverberg class).

I also have to do all of this while working to free them of their urge to please me, which has been surprising in its intensity. The conditioning they have had to become “good students” is drastically counterproductive in the Meisner work and I have expended much energy attempting to convince them that they do not have to perform—either for me or for each other.

One semester (of two weekly classes that are less than two hours in length) is, quite simply, only enough time to scratch the surface, especially when half of the class has had to miss multiple classes. In spite of the definite progress that has been made, particularly by the first-years, I am leaving my first experience as a university-level Meisner instructor with a bit of disappointment. I am supremely grateful to have had the opportunity to impart to the students the specific benefits of this most daring and effective Technique, but having seen this work really take hold, I find myself wishing desperately for more studio time with them. I can only hope that, as was the case with me when I was their age, that I have, at the very least, succeeded in whetting their appetites so that they will endeavor to learn more on their own.

Chapter Six: Applying the Meisner Technique to Longform Improvisation

I have been a professional improviser for the past eight years and have worked, studied, and performed in cities that include Atlanta, Nashville, Chicago, Richmond, and Philadelphia. Having an extensive background in scripted work, I found myself missing the emotional components of Theatre performance. As is often a criticism of improvisational Theatre, I found myself dissatisfied with the shallow nature of the work. I debated on whether or not I should give up Improv altogether and go back to traditional Theatre. I was hesitant to do so, quite frankly, because I had discovered that I have a more specific appeal as an improviser than I do as an actor and that, consequently, I had become something of a hot commodity. I was not eager to give up the opportunity to work with remarkable regularity, only to return to the world of waiting for my phone to ring with good news.

In an attempt to find a solution to my problem, I made the transition from Shortform Improvisation to Longform Improvisation in 2007. I reasoned that this move would represent a compromise between the two worlds I had been straddling for the past several years: the worlds of Improv and Theatre. I was hoping Longform would act as a sort of bridge, giving me the chance to delve more deeply into a character, while still affording me abundant opportunities to work.

The biggest difference between Longform and Shortform is that the latter is rooted in a game-based format. Popularized by companies like ComedySportz and shows like *Who's Line is It, Anyway?*, it has a much larger fan base than does Longform and is what most people think of when the issue of Improv performance is raised.

In stark contrast to the style of Shortform, Longform is a scene-based art form and is largely dependent on players' ability to invest in their onstage relationships. Depending on the performance format, a Longform improviser could play the same character for anywhere from just a few seconds to a couple of hours. Formats range from a montage, which is a series of unrelated scenes that can last for any length of time, to an entirely improvised full-length play. The latter format is performed primarily in the San Francisco area by a company called The Improv Playhouse of San Francisco.

With players who have strong backgrounds in the theatre, The Improv Playhouse commands a respect that is not often given to artists who devote their time to improv performance. Having had the privilege to study with the teachers and actors of this company on several occasions, I know firsthand how seriously they take their craft. Contrary to many other well-known and popular improvisers, the players of The Improv Playhouse are polished, poised, dressed sharply, prepared, and well-paced. I have seen them perform many improvised one-act plays while they headlined festivals and I was struck, each time, by how much higher their caliber is than virtually any other improv company performing now. It was after seeing them for the first time that I decided to try my hand at Longform.

Most Longform Improv being performed today follows one of three formats: The Harold, The Montage, and The Armando. None of these formats call for the kind of commitment to character and circumstances that is necessary for the improvised play format undertaken by The

Improv Playhouse of San Francisco and, specifically, by their ensemble, *The Naked Stage*. When *The Naked Stage* performs, they ask the audience for a suggestion of a location that could fit on the stage. (The first time I saw them, they were given “bowling alley” as their location.)

Next, each of the four cast members takes a turn or two describing in detail (or scene-painting) objects and pieces of furniture in the space. Sometimes, the players ask for the suggestion of a final addition to the space that they must then justify during the course of the piece. (In the Bowling Alley performance, they were tasked with justifying a mausoleum.) After a brief recap of the established space, the lights go down, the players walk to the wings, and the lights are brought back up. So begins their play.

Having seen this format many times, I have been struck consistently by the honesty of the actors onstage and the clarity with which they appear to be discovering their story rather than inventing it as they go along. While training with two of their most seasoned players, I was informed that, whenever possible, they employ two-person scenes of every combination of actors to aid in the development of their play. I took this to mean that the unfolding of the relationships is far more important than any element of plot. I wondered how I would get my improv students and my ensemble mates to understand that genuine interaction is the key to a sustained piece of Longform. Immediately, my mind went to Meisner, who reminds the actor that “you don't have to play at being the character; it's right there in your doing it” (Meisner 24).

I first taught Meisner as it applies to Longform in a six-week workshop for a satellite group under the umbrella of FuseBox, the improv company I helped found in Nashville. As is often the case with improvisers, the five ensemble members of the group had all gotten their starts in Shortform. Only one of them had a background in scripted acting and the lot of them had developed an intense compulsion to be witty and clever above all else. In short, the

Shortform sensibilities they had developed had left them with problematic habits that got in the way of any sort of committed scene work, even in a montage.

When I began working with them, I purposely left vague how much of the exercises being done were from my Meisner training. This decision came out of a desire to keep from intimidating them, as many of them had expressed concerns that they were not experienced or talented enough to do “real acting” and had calculatedly chosen improv as an alternative to conventional Theatre. It was only about halfway through the workshop that I let on that they were, in fact, using the Meisner Technique as a means to ground their previously frenetic play style.

The experience teaching the satellite group in Nashville was so enlightening that I developed a three-hour workshop that I pitched to improv festivals and theatres across the Southeast. I have thrice been accepted to teach *Applying the Meisner Technique to Longform Improvisation* at Atlanta’s Black Box Improv Festival and have taught at the *Spontaneous Combustion Festival* twice. Additionally, I conducted master classes for the Richmond Comedy Coalition and for Atlanta’s JackPie Theatre. I have also taught an abbreviated version of this workshop at Southeastern Theatre Conference and to the Theatre Department at Georgia College & State University. The description of the class, as it appeared in the 2011 SETC Convention program, is provided below:

Applying the Meisner Technique to Long form Improvisation

It is often said that improv lacks the depth and substance of scripted Theatre. This workshop will employ the Meisner Technique to dispel the common misconception that one must actively TRY to be funny in order to succeed in the spontaneous creation of

comedic scenes. In utilizing Meisner's repetition and independent activity work to ground your improv, you will discover that there is nothing funnier than human beings simply relating and reacting to each other.

Each time I teach this class, the premise is always the same: “You must discover what is already there, rather than invent what you think will be interesting.” I teach my students how to do this by employing Meisner’s Repetition exercises and the independent activity work.

In altering the Technique to be more conducive to the creation of comedic scenes, I end the independent activity work at the “simple and specific” stage. I also modify the exercise so that it calls for the activity to involve a space object, or invisible prop. This is because, in improv, actors must usually create their environment and their space. Very often, improvisers go the route of becoming “two talking heads” and do not create an environment for themselves out of fear that they will not be precise enough.

To assuage these fears, I ask first that one partner engages in an independent activity while maintaining the Repetition with the other partner. Next, I ask that both partners participate in an activity while playing the Repetition. The third phase of this adapted Repetition calls for both participants to engage in the same activity while repeating. When I feel as though they are truly connecting, I will instruct them to “start the scene.” At this point, they will commence with conversational dialogue. The one rule is that they must make it about the relationship and not about the activity. Whenever I feel that the scene is becoming too much about the activity or any other external factors, I have them go back to the Repetition until they are connecting again.

Meisner clarifies the transition from repetitive dialogue to what he terms ‘responding reasonably’:

In the beginning the mindless repetition of the basic exercise had value. It eliminated a need for you to think and to write dialogue out of your head in order to keep talking—as if acting were talking, which it is not. And the illogical nature of the dialogue opened you up to the impulsive shifts in your instinctual behavior caused by what was being done to you by your scene partner, which can lead to real emotion. This is fundamental to good acting. Now...we have moved beyond the fundamental. (Meisner 107)

Being successful in abandoning the urge to pile on too much is absolutely crucial when performing Longform. This is because, in Improv Theatre, all we have is the here and now. If there is too much attention paid to invention, not only does the audience lose interest, but the players become so bogged down by exposition that they abandon the tether to their scene partners. Beginning improvisers are notorious for their tendency to “verbally vomit” and effectively kill the scene. Mordecai Lawner remembers Meisner’s thoughts on the issue:

It would make Sandy crazy that actors would almost immediately want to improvise from the head—that is making up dialogue, playing what they want and making up dialogue about it—and Sandy’s proposition was you let it go wherever it wants to go, depending on what the other person’s doing. He always had to pull people back during the improvisation from ‘playwriting,’ as he called it—from trying to write a play or a story—so that it doesn’t come from the head. He despised what he termed ‘intellectualisms.’

In my estimation, there is no tool more effective than the Meisner Technique to keep improvisers “out of their heads” and connected to each other. After seeing the benefits of the work time and again in my workshops, I began to realize that each time I teach, whatever the specific focus of the workshop or class, I am informing everything I do with the Meisner approach. As is evidenced by the included course proposal, I most certainly relied on Meisner while teaching my Longform Improvisation course at VCU.

Additionally, I have used my findings to develop an improvised two-person play in a format known as a “high wire” or a “mono-scene.” Essentially, the structure is that of an extended (usually twenty-five minutes) scene which takes place in one location, from which there are no entrances or exits. The entire form is dependent on the players’ ability to allow themselves to react off one another in a genuine way.

In performing this format for over two years now, I have found that I simply do not have the time to ignore my impulses. With only myself and my partner to deal with, any moments spent planning or strategizing will stop the scene in its tracks. I have observed that, whenever I am in trouble or feel lost somehow, I need only “take the first thing” off of my partner to bring myself immediately back to the world we have created. I honestly cannot remember a time that doing this did not help us find our way.

Witnessing firsthand, both in my students and in myself, the power of this work to aid in the spontaneous creation of truly inspiring, meaningful, and honest Theatre, I feel compelled to share with other improvisers and actors who I know must be struggling with the same issues that I had when I was first led to Longform. I have seen that, with the Meisner Technique, it is possible to achieve and maintain the same kind of full inner life of a character that one strives for

in the realm of scripted Theatre. Consequently, I feel that I have been successful in my efforts to use Longform as a bridge between scripted and non-scripted Theatre.

It is my sincere hope that my pursuit of applying the Meisner Technique to Longform Improvisation will allow me to be a major contributor in the movement to create Improv that is deserving of the title of “Theatre.” The art of Improv is still relatively new and the field has been so heavily dominated by players who value gimmickry over substance that those who wish to turn it into a respected craft have our work cut out for us. I contend that, if the work being done in San Francisco is any indication of the direction in which Improv is headed, it is only a matter of time before Theatre elitists stop marginalizing improvisers and begin to allow us to join their ranks.

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**Robert Meisner's interviews are cited in-text as follows: (RM and HB), denoting the interviewee through the use of initials (i.e. "HB" is Harold Baldrige; "KL" is Kitty Lunn, etc.).*

***The Meisner Master Class dvd is cited in-text as follows: (MMC).*

Appendix A: Course Proposal for Fall 2010

Introduction to the Meisner Technique

REASON FOR CLASS:

The Meisner technique is a wonderful tool for actors wishing to connect with their scene partners in a very truthful way. Because the foundational exercises are centered on improvisation, with no text involved, actors are free to follow their impulses--to speak only when they feel the urge to speak, to move only when they are motivated, and to connect to their surroundings and fellow actors in a truly spontaneous way. Meisner's method, rooted in the belief that "acting is living truthfully under the imaginary given circumstances," has been proven to result in realistic, grounded, and connected scenework. Actors who have experience in this type of work bring a freshness and believability to their acting that eludes many others. Because of the emphasis on improvisation, the Meisner-trained actor has become so accustomed to

following his instincts, that the introduction of text does not impede him from making the character's words and choices his own. This approach is particularly effective in contemporary work.

CLASS DESIGN:

This course is intended for freshman and sophomore Theatre majors, but students of all ability and experience levels will benefit from the work. For the more novice actor, Meisner training will give him a strong foundation of invested relationships and grounded scenework. For the student with a more extensive background in Theatre, the class will be very effective in keeping him present and "in the moment" onstage. Meisner work does wonders for getting performers "out of their heads" and back into the now.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Each meeting will begin with a warm-up that is specifically designed to foster a sense of ensemble and create a safe and lively space. Following the warm-up, students will usually engage in at least one round of improvised two-person scenes (time permitting). We will begin our work by experimenting with improvisation and will transition into Meisner's well-known "repetition exercises" after a sense of trust has been cultivated within the ensemble. We will then workshop assigned scenes.

My approach, while based very much on Sanford Meisner's teachings, will call for a more positive and supportive working environment than is sometimes associated with his Technique. This class should meet twice a week for at least one hour and forty-five minutes each time.

COURSE CONTENT

Although much of the emphasis in this class will be on work that is spontaneous in nature, the curriculum will be very carefully planned and the students will be on a structured journey that the instructor will facilitate. This course will be an accelerated version of the two-year long training that most Meisner programs require. Emphasis will be placed on both process and product, so that students will be able to apply what they've learned in a production, rehearsal, or casting situation.

I would like the course to culminate into a one-night-only scene-showcase in Shafer. This performance will serve as the final for the course. Students will also be keeping a journal regularly to chronicle their progress.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Meisner on Acting by Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell

The Actor's Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique by William Esper and Damon DiMarco

Appendix B: Proposed Course Outline for Fall 2010

Introduction to the Meisner Technique

Submitted by Mandy L. Butler

WEEK ONE:

Introductions, group exercises, silent scenes

WEEK TWO:

Group exercises, improvised two-person scenes, partner assignments

WEEK THREE:

Improvised two-person scenes, "Find Something You've Lost" exercise

WEEK FOUR:

Introduction of repetition exercises

WEEK FIVE:

Continuation of repetition exercises, Point of view repetition introduced

WEEK SIX:

Continuation of repetition exercises, Further exploration of point of view

WEEK SEVEN:

Discussion of "the pinch and the ouch," Continued repetition exercises

WEEK EIGHT:

Discussion of Meisner reading, Independent Activity exercises

WEEK NINE:

Continued work on the Independent Activity (Simple and Specific)

WEEK TEN:

"A Little More Important"

WEEK ELEVEN:

"A Little More Important" (cont.)

WEEK TWELVE:

"In the Extreme"

WEEK THIRTEEN:

Viewing of "Meisner Master Class" dvd, Continued work on Independent Activity ("In the Extreme"), Scenes Assigned

WEEK FOURTEEN:

Workshop scenes with an emphasis on incorporating independent activity, Discussion of

"Action" and "Objective" through the Meisner lens

WEEK FIFTEEN:

Rehearsal for showcase, dress rehearsal, wrap-up

Appendix C: Course Syllabus

Introduction To Meisner Technique

Theatre 491 014
Spring 2011
Shafer Street Playhouse, Newdick Theatre
MW 9am-10:50am
Instructor: Mandy L. Butler
Email: butlerml@vcu.edu
Office Hours: By appointment only

Why Take This Course?

The Meisner Technique is a wonderful tool for actors wishing to connect with their scene partners in a very truthful way. Because the foundational exercises are centered on improvisation, with no text involved, actors are free to follow their impulses--to speak only when they feel the urge to speak, to move only when they are motivated, and to connect to their surroundings and fellow actors in a truly spontaneous way. Meisner's method, rooted in the belief that "acting is living truthfully under the imaginary given circumstances," has been proven to result in realistic, grounded, and connected scenework. Actors who have experience in this type of work bring a freshness and believability to their acting that eludes many others. Because of the emphasis on improvisation, the Meisner-trained actor has become so accustomed to following his instincts, that the introduction of text does not impede him from making the character's words and choices his own. This approach is particularly effective in contemporary

work.

This course will include:

1. Vocal and physical warm-ups
2. Many improvisational exercises to get students comfortable enough to take risks individually and with each other
3. Work in Meisner's Exercises, including, but not limited to, Repetition, Independent Activities, and Criminal Action Problems.
4. Improvised and Scripted Scenework
5. Improvised Monologue work
6. Journaling

Required Text:

The Actor's Art and Craft by William Esper and Damon DiMarco

Recommended Texts:

Sanford Meisner on Acting by Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell

The Sanford Meisner Approach, Workbooks 1-4 by Larry Silverberg

I will be providing you with excerpts from each of these texts, but it would behoove you to get your own copies. You will likely refer back to them for years to come.

Classroom Polices:

1. Be on time! I know it's early, but you must be on time and ready to go at 9am. Tardiness is very disrespectful to the space, to your classmates, and to me. If you are more than five minutes late, you will be counted tardy. Two tardies equal one absence. You are allowed two unexcused absences, after which your final course grade drops one letter for every day that you miss and 1/2 a letter for each tardy. Excused absences will be negotiated with the instructor on an individual

basis.

2. Please, please, please do not wear black clothes for this course. Much of your work will involve specific, physical observations of partners and will prove to be quite tedious if everyone is dressed alike! You must wear clothes that are comfortable enough to allow for movement, but are not baggy. Hair must be OUT OF YOUR FACE. Tie it back or wear a headband. You may not wear hats of any kind. You may wear comfortable shoes, or you may go barefoot. If you are not in compliance with dress code by 9:05am, you will be asked to leave and change your clothes. You will be counted tardy for the day, and will be marked absent if you do not return to class that day.

3. You must be respectful of all students (and to the professor). Any disrespect, ridicule, harassment, etc. will not be tolerated. In the event of disrespect, you may be asked to leave class at my discretion and may be counted tardy or absent for the day.

4. Speak up! Classroom participation is a big part of any performance course!

5. No eating in class! Only WATER in a closed container is permitted. Do not chew gum!

6. Turn your cell phone off (not to vibrate) before entering the classroom. If your phone rings during class, you will be asked to leave and will be counted absent for the day. If you have a special circumstance that requires that your phone be on (i.e. a family member in the hospital), please see me BEFORE class and we will talk about it.

7. This work will challenge and frustrate you. At times, you will feel as though you have taken two steps forward, only to have to then take three steps back. I've been there. Stick with it...and adopt a "When in Rome" kind of attitude. This means that, even if you are skeptical, expand your comfort zone and try anyway. (This being said, if there is ever a time that you feel truly uncomfortable, please speak with me so that your discomfort may be addressed. There is a big

difference between challenging oneself and being destructive and the emotional safety of every student is my first priority.)

Performance:

1. Contentless scenes, repetition, group exercises, criminal action problems, improvisation, and scenework.
2. Your performance responsibilities will also include many other exercises (both with partners and without). Your performance grade is based on your commitment and dedication to all assigned work.
3. The nature of this work requires that all students be prepared to work/perform with no given notice. Failure to do so will result in a loss of participation points.

Written:

1. Students are required to read and analyze one chapter of William Esper's book. The papers must be at least four (4) pages in length and typed in twelve (12) point font and double-spaced. The instructor will inform you of the specific due date, but it will be near semester's end.
2. Students will be required to keep a bound class journal. Some class time will be allotted for journaling, but students will also be expected to write down their observations on their own time. Journal entries will not be read to the class (unless the student wishes to read them), but the instructor reserves the right to inspect journals at any point throughout the semester. You will be graded on the frequency of your journal entries, as well as their content. These journals must demonstrate a point of view!
3. Students will write a five (5) page paper on their experience in class. This paper, intended to be a final reflection, will be due on our last day of class.

4. Students can expect to be given a few short writing assignments throughout the duration of the course. Ample notice and instructions will be given before any assignments are due.

Grading Scale: Grades are based on the following scale.

A=90-100

B=80-89

C=70-79

D=60-69

F=60 and below

Your Grade:

Participation, Respect, Dedication, Preparation=50%

Journal, Papers, Misc. Writing=10%

Monologues, Scenework, Classroom Exercises=30%

Final=10%

The instructor reserves the right to update or change this syllabus and the class schedule at any time. Should anything change, students will be notified in writing.

Vita

Mandy L. Butler was born on June 29, 1981 in Macon, Georgia and is an American citizen. She graduated from Mary Persons High School in Forsyth, Georgia in 1999. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Performance from Georgia College & State University in 2003. She is a two-time Irene Ryan award nominee and a member of Southeastern Theatre Conference. She has been improvising professionally since 2003 and has been a featured ensemble member at Atlanta's Whole World Theatre, Improv Nashville, and the Richmond Comedy Coalition. In 2007, she co-founded FuseBox Theatre, which was voted Best New Theatre Company by readers of *The Nashville Scene*. She has trained and performed with players from the Annoyance Theatre, iO Chicago, iO West, the Improv Playhouse of San Francisco, and New York's Upright Citizen's Brigade. While in Nashville, she headed up the Improvisation curriculum at Bravo Creative Arts Center and served as an instructor for the pioneer YMCA artEMBRACE program. She has studied the Meisner Technique with teachers from Los Angeles, Nashville, Chicago, New York, and Atlanta. She has led workshops, master classes, and training sessions all over the east coast, most recently at the SETC Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. She was privileged to teach Intro to Acting, Longform Improvisation, and The Meisner Technique at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she served as an adjunct faculty member. In July of 2011, she will complete her Meisner teacher certification through Larry Silverberg's True Acting Institute.